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ABSTRACT

School climate is a term used to describe how people feel about their school. The following 10 factors are described: (1) a supportive, stimulating environment; (2) student-centered; (3) positive expectations; (4) feedback; (5) rewards; (6) a sense of family; (7) closeness to parents and community; (8) communication; (9) achievement; and (10) trust. Basic steps in the climate improvement process are (1) inform and involve; (2) assess the climate; (3) set improvement goals; (4) develop a plan; and (5) implement, monitor, and evaluate the plan. Appended are 19 selected references and a list of 11 selected climate instruments. (SI)

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Tips For Improving School Climate

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Tips for Improving School Climate

Effective schools share a number of characteristics. But one consistently rises to the top: a winning school climate. In fact, a winning school climate provides the very foundation for a sound educational program.

When the climate is right, people are inspired to do their best. Teachers and students — supported by parents and others — do what needs to be done to stimulate learning. Achievement generally rises. Individuals succeed. The school succeeds. The community thrives — and so does our nation.

What Is Climate?

Climate is a term used to describe how people feel about their school. It is a combination of beliefs, values, and attitudes shared by students, teachers, administrators, parents, bus drivers, office personnel, custodians, cafeteria workers, and others who play an important role in the life of the school.

When a school has a "winning climate," people feel proud, connected, and committed. They support, help, and care for each other. When the climate is right, there is a certain joy in coming to school, either to teach or to learn.

Volumes have been written on how to assess and improve school climate. This booklet identifies the 10 factors that deserve particular attention. These are the factors — according to a half century of research plus hundreds of informal sessions and interviews with teachers, students, parents, and school administrators — that seem to make a real difference in a school's climate.

Take a look at the suggestions. Use them as a personal checklist for improving school climate. If you'd like to make improving climate a schoolwide project, turn first to pages 16 and 17. The basics of a process for doing just that are provided there.

The 10 Essentials

Schools with winning school climates have these 10 factors in common:

1. A supportive, stimulating environment
2. Student-centered
3. Positive expectations
4. Feedback
5. Rewards
6. A sense of family
7. Closeness to parents and community
8. Communication
9. Achievement
10. Trust

Supportive, Stimulating Environment

"Make my day"
— exciting, challenging,
and fun!

Teachers teach best and students learn and enjoy more in a positive, vital, and robust learning environment. Teaching and learning become exciting, challenging, and even fun. There are many ways to create that special environment. You can:

- **Spruce up the physical environment.** Create a backdrop that reflects beliefs about what a good school is and that helps develop a sense of pride. Try for fresh paint in classrooms, halls, cafeteria, offices, and other high traffic areas. Exhibit pictures of students and faculty, posters, and students' work in the classroom and throughout the school.
- **Exude enthusiasm.** People respond to those who are enthusiastic and vibrant. Let that positive inner spirit show through in your smile, posture, voice, and words. Encourage others, including students, to do the same.
- **Promote positive student attitudes.** Expect the best from students. Don't forget they are in the process of becoming. Help them become. Discuss with them what they can do to make their school and themselves the best they can be. Help them to see their potential. Books, videotapes, films, and exposure to role models through assemblies and class visits do a great deal to help develop positive student attitudes.
- **Promote fun.** Students generally love humor. They love to laugh and enjoy seeing adults be real people. So do your colleagues. Have fun in your classroom and throughout the school. Participate in skits and special dress-up days. Tell and listen to funny stories.
- **Emphasize growth.** Everyone can be a winner in an environment that promotes doing your best. The staff sets the pace. Work hard to catch students making progress, academically and socially. Set goals in academic subjects and social skills and chart progress. Develop themes and slogans that emphasize growth and make growth an end in itself.

- **Set and maintain standards for student behavior.** Students tend to live up to what is expected of them. Involve them and others in discussions about what those expectations should be. Share those expectations in a positive manner in assemblies and in classes and through handbooks, posters, and the public address system. Maintain records of discipline referrals, using a computer or other system. Chart referrals monthly and use the information to catch people succeeding and to identify problem areas.

- **Be inventive and creative.** Take time to dream and to share thoughts and dreams with others. Create an environment that supports new ideas and good tries. Recognize teachers who try new methods in the classroom. Try a new wrinkle on a established program or try an experimental course. Conduct brainstorming and problem-solving sessions. Provide a "better way" box and invite suggestions from parents, students, and staff.
- **Help and support colleagues.** Colleagues need support and understanding. Listen carefully for someone who may be down or experiencing problems. Let others know you are willing to lend an ear, share teaching materials, give advice, punch hit if possible, or help in any way you can. Make the faculty lounge a support shelter for positive and supportive interaction.
- **Champion respect and acceptance.** In schools with a winning school climate, each individual treats others as worthy human beings, accepting differences. Enjoy the personalities and idiosyncrasies of those around you. Remind others that this country was founded on and has prospered from a philosophy that exalts diversity. Discourage ridicule, put downs, and favoritism. Send a message to students, parents, and staff that says, "We treat *everyone* with respect and dignity."

FEELINGS

Student-Centered

What's best
for the kids?

Great schools and great teachers make a conscious effort to be close to students. They have that extraordinary ability to burrow into students' worlds and provide experiences that interest them. Each decision made and activity conducted emanates from the essential question: What's best for the kids? To stay close and be student-centered:

- **Tune in to students.** Find out what students are thinking and feeling. Spend a private moment or two and ask them what is happening in their lives and how things are going. Regularly, perhaps monthly, conduct a survey in your classroom and across the school. Among the important questions that might be asked: Are classes interesting? Are you getting the help you need? Are you being challenged? Do you feel you are treated with respect and dignity? Do you feel safe and secure in this school? Do you enjoy coming to school? What about the school do you really like?
- **Include students in decision making.** Students can lead in exploring ways to improve the school. Provide leadership training and activities that offer students opportunities to assume leadership. Consider using a "quality circles" approach in classrooms and the school. Make strengthening the student council or other advisory groups a top priority. Seek student input informally. Talk with individual students and with small groups. Don't forget to hold students accountable by asking them to monitor and evaluate the results of their decisions.
- **Promote active learning.** Use teaching methods and activities that involve students physically and mentally. Have them *doing*, not just listening. Provide interesting problems to solve, issues to discuss or debate, and tasks to complete. Mock elections, letters to legislators, and interviews with employers excite students. Call on students frequently and make them think. Have them lead class discussions. Provide practice opportunities and ask them to give demonstrations. Take a field trip when appropriate.

- **Provide variety.** Variety is the spice of both life and learning. Great schools and teachers stay out of the proverbial rut by planning for variety. Change the posters, bulletin boards, and classroom configuration from time to time. Include lecture, discussion, questions, practice, activities, group work, student presentations, and other methods in unit and lesson plans. And build in time for student reflection and fun.
- **Allow for student differences.** While you may not be able to implement a truly individualized instructional program, do what you can to provide maximum challenge through flexible curriculum and instructional techniques. Some strategies for providing for individual differences include contracts; enrichment materials; differentiated assignments; extra credit; peer tutors; and learning aids such as tape recorders, simulations, computers, and learning packets.

- **Conduct follow-up studies.** Former students are a valuable source of information. Check with students who have gone on to upper levels in the district or who have graduated, and find out where they feel they were most successful and satisfied. Ask how you could have better met their needs.

Positive Expectations

Expect the best
and you're likely to get it.

Research tells us that we get what we expect. Beliefs and attitudes about others influence how we treat them, which in turn influences their attitudes, behavior, and performance. Positive expectations create a positive self-fulfilling prophecy where people expect to succeed. In many schools, positive expectations have raised student achievement significantly. To create a positive self-fulfilling prophecy in your school:

- **Expect the best from students.** Help students unleash their potential by believing in them. Remind yourself daily that all students can learn, grow, and behave appropriately. Post this in a reminder where you will see it every morning.
- **Send positive messages.** Work hard to ensure your facial expressions, tone of voice, gestures, posture, and other verbal and nonverbal messages say, "You're okay." Or better yet, "You're great!"
- **Model high standards.** We transmit expectations by everything we say and do. Start class on time and provide prompt, quality feedback on written work. Be sure handouts, tests, and other materials are top quality. Dress and act professionally.
- **Learn more about expectations.** Belief in the power of expectations changes behavior. Read about and attend workshops on teacher expectations, and share what you learn with others. Encourage key staff members to do the same. Structure student activities to discuss expectations. Use themes, slogans, and symbols that communicate high expectations.

Feedback

Feedback is the
breakfast of champions.

Even champions need coaches and quality feedback. We all need to know how we are doing in very specific terms. It motivates us to continue to do the important things we are doing well and helps us to know what needs improvement. Be sure to:

- **Catch others succeeding!** When a student or colleague does something well, recognize that achievement. Let them know performance counts by sending notes, making phone calls, providing rewards and, most important, by telling them face-to-face.
- **Watch your praise.** Praise privately as well as publicly. Provide the praise on the spot or as soon as possible, and proportionate to the importance of the achievement. Give students specific written and oral comments to improve performance. Give examples to clarify your expectations. Make sure to communicate what they did well and what to work on and why.
- **Chart your feedback.** Get in the habit of reinforcing others. On note cards, write down at least one strength for students and colleagues with whom you work. Include on the cards a space for marking the date you provided feedback to each person. Review each card from time to time to ensure you provide needed feedback frequently.
- **Be candid but positive.** When you give negative feedback, do it in a positive way. Use words that focus on the behavior, not the person. Emphasize your intent to give information as a basis for growth, not criticism. Be open and sincere, but be sensitive. Keep a smile in your voice or pen.

Rewards

Bring a crowd
into the winners' circle.

FIVE

Rewards are tangible, visible symbols of success. Every time a student, parent, or colleague receives a deserved award, he or she feels like a champion. Here are ways to perpetuate that winning attitude:

- **Applaud pacesetters.** Pacesetters include those who meet the standards set for them, not just those who achieve above the standards. Have a pacesetter banquet, send winners on a trip, or transport them to the front door of the school in a limousine. Institute a Hall of Fame complete with photographs of your champions. Awards luncheons, breakfasts, and banquets also help. Send letters home and publicize pacesetters' names and accomplishments in the media.
- **Use multiple, varied award programs.** Provide varied levels of different strokes for different folks and do it in different ways. Recognize the top 40 percent or 30 percent in addition to the top 5 percent. Also recognize those students who have improved by 40 percent, 30 percent, and so on. Use letters, pins, certificates, plaques, or public announcements to recognize achievement. Conduct a brainstorming session with your colleagues and students to identify other meaningful awards.
- **Develop an achievement newsletter.** Publish a quarterly school newsletter that recognizes outstanding accomplishments for that quarter. Use pictures, examples, illustrations, and stories describing who did what and how it made a difference.
- **Showcase academic achievement.** Trophies are tangible signs of achievement. Maintain an academic trophy case; be sure it's situated so all can see that your school values academic achievement.

A Sense of Family

Hang together through thick and thin.

A great school resembles the best of families. Its members support and help each other through thick and thin. Whether a school is large or small, it can develop that family spirit. Here are ways:

- **Help new people.** Welcome new people and help newcomers learn the ropes. Introduce them to others and to members of the community. Be sure they understand policies and procedures they need to know. Share materials and resources and help them learn about the school and community.
- **Support school activities.** Attend plays, games, dances, and other activities as often as you can. Students love to see you attend because it sends them a clear message: You care about them and the school.
- **Be involved.** Help make decisions and solve problems. Well-run committees and faculty meetings take time, but are worth it. Examine the issues and make your views known. Make committee and staff meetings "pull together" activities. Be positive and supportive and help others do the same. When decisions are made, try to support them.
- **Acknowledge and deal with conflict.** Conflict is negative energy that needs to be channeled into creative, motivating energy. When conflict is suppressed, it festers. Read about conflict and develop strategies to deal with it as openly and with as much caring as you can. A number of suggestions provided in this booklet help defuse conflict — particularly those that relate to trust, communication, and closeness to parents and community.

SIX

Closeness to Parents and Community

The customer is right.

Those for whom we deliver school services are the ones who ultimately count. Parents and community members demand and have a right to expect excellent service and quality education. Schools must narrow the gap between expectations and achievement. To stay close to parents and community members:

- **Make serving the customer a top priority.** Discuss service and quality assurance in a faculty meeting and wage a campaign to let others know these are top priorities. Letters, newsletters, the media, and conversations with parents and community members provide great opportunities to send this message.
- **Showcase your school.** Walk the extra mile and show your customers the great job schools and students are doing. Open houses, parent nights, curriculum fairs, and similar activities improve communication and attitudes toward the school.
- **Invite feedback.** Every interaction with individuals or a parent or community group is an opportunity to communicate and provide better service. Take the time to hear what parents and community members are thinking and feeling. Needs assessments and surveys help. Place suggestion boxes in the school and even throughout the community. Encourage telephone calls, letters, and personal visits. Communicate information about parent and community expectations and satisfaction with the school to the staff through notes, memos, and discussions. Include comments from parents and community members to help others understand their viewpoint.
- **Work on customer satisfaction.** Parents and community members, like all customers, are often forced to react to misinformation or are simply frustrated. Don't be defensive. Listen to the problem and try to view it through their eyes. Let them know you appreciate their concern and help them to leave school feeling you did your best to help them.

SEVEN

Communication

Keep the lines open
and the flow positive.

Communication is what holds a school together. It is through communication that people in the school receive information and exchange ideas. It is also the way beliefs, values, and expectations are transmitted and value given to others. To be a great communicator:

- **Keep others posted.** Communicate frequently with all groups. Be sure students, coworkers, and administrators have the information they need. Make announcements, drop a note or memo, or stop by their classes or offices. It is equally important to communicate regularly with parents and the community. Provide them the school calendar and let them know about special events. Keep them posted on instructional and curricular improvement and on school improvement and staff development. Involve them whenever possible in decisions that affect their children and their community.
- **Be an active listener.** Good listeners are typically seen as more caring, concerned, and trustworthy. Let students, parents, and coworkers know you care by giving your undivided attention. Use active listening techniques, such as listening to voice tone and observing facial expressions and body language, to determine feelings and emotions. Use reflective and clarifying statements to check for understanding.
- **Choose your words carefully.** Be sensitive. Self-concepts are incredibly fragile. What we see on the outside is often not what others feel on the inside. Soft words soothe and motivate. Harsh words sting and repel.
- **Communicate student progress.** Effective communication with parents is key to enhancing student learning. A phone call, a letter, a note, or a conference may mean the constructive difference for a student. The tone or words should be helpful and positive. Plan conferences carefully. Be sure to have goals and objectives and data to share with parents. Once again, show you care by being a good listener and carefully choosing your words. You may even want to develop a teacher-parent plan of action.

EIGHT

Achievement

Success instills pride
that leads to greater success.

NINE

Great schools are driven by pride — the special feeling that comes from top performance and achievement and knowing you make a difference. To get that special feeling:

- **Set and track personal goals.** Research tells us that people who set goals and put them in writing are most likely to succeed. Set goals that are slightly out of reach, but not out of sight; and put the goals in writing. Pick just a few, not many.
- **Set and track classroom goals.** Research also tells us that classroom goal setting enhances achievement. Examine student work and achievement data and select concepts and skills you want to see your students understand and improve. Develop an action plan and monitor student progress. Share the results with students and parents. Then celebrate success.
- **Set and track building level goals.** A winning team needs goals. Working together to reach a goal enhances communication, trust, feedback, and molding a collection of individuals into a group. Achieving transforms that group into a proud team of people who want to continue experiencing success. Participate in staff development to foster school improvement. Work with the staff in developing a school profile and determining what areas need improvement. Formulate goals that will make a difference, and develop and implement the plan. Make careful monitoring and evaluation of progress a part of the plan.
- **Find achievement.** Remind yourself of what makes a good day — one in which you know students learned. Look and listen for clues. It may be on faces, in a writing exercise, or on a quiz. It may come from a story shared by a parent or student. It often comes from knowing you've reached a personal or classroom goal.

Trust

The glue that
holds the school together.

Trust is the essential element for creating bonds between and among people. Where there is trust, leaders can lead, teachers can teach, learners can learn, and a collection of unique individuals can become a community of learners. To promote trust in your school:

- **Be consistent.** Others trust those on whom they can rely. Be predictable in grading, discipline, and how you relate to others.
- **Guard confidentiality.** Nothing destroys trust more quickly or painfully than a slip of the tongue. Avoid gossip and encourage others to do likewise. Treat conversation with a student or parent as special and private.
- **Be fair.** Students place a high premium on fairness. Don't play favorites or let difficult people cause you to let others think you are unfair. Weigh the facts and make decisions objectively.
- **Forgive and forget.** Students tune out those who carry a grudge and coworkers become wary of them. Begin each day with a clean slate and let others do the same. Remember to smile or say hello the day following a trying incident.
- **Tell the truth.** Trust and believability may be synonymous. Avoid conflicting messages. If you have to be the bearer of bad news, do it sensitively but in a straightforward manner. Be sure your word is your bond.
- **Maintain eye contact.** Eye contact is one of the most direct and powerful forms of nonverbal communication. Research shows that people perceive those who "look them in the eye" as more open, honest, and trustworthy.
- **Respect others.** We trust those who treat us with respect and dignity. Ridicule and put downs undermine our trust in each other. Acknowledge the response of students in a constructive manner. Give value to students and coworkers by recognizing their positive attributes. Listening to and accepting others' ideas are powerful ways to show respect.

The Process Of Improving School Climate

School improvement is a process, not an event. It is seldom orderly, often unpredictable. It usually occurs in stages. Each individual in a school can affect its climate. But by working together — through a "process" of school improvement — you can have an even greater effect.

Here are some very basic steps you'll want to take:

Step 1: Inform and involve

Information leads to inspiration and involvement fosters commitment. People first need to understand what climate is, how it affects them and others, and what can be done to make a difference. So to start, share this booklet with others and enlist their aid. Disseminate copies of the research, books, and articles included in the references. Bring in speakers. Encourage students, parents, and staff to attend workshops and seminars and ask them to share what they learn.

Most important, bring people together to talk about school climate. Start with small groups in the school and community. Then form a climate task force to provide direction, enhance communication, and coordinate activities. Twelve to fifteen concerned parents, students, faculty, staff, and administrators is an optimal group size. Their leader could be the principal, a teacher, parent, or citizen.

Step 2: Assess your school climate

When there is an adequate understanding of school climate and its importance, there should be interest in examining the climate of the school. Three key decisions must be made:

- What will be assessed?
- Who shall provide the information?
- When shall the assessment be made?

First, it is important to determine the factors in which you are especially interested, and to select or develop an instrument that assesses those factors. Ideally, this instrument:

- Can be completed in less than 30 minutes.
- Will provide results that are easily interpreted.
- Will have norms that help you determine where your school stands compared to schools similar to yours.
- Will have parallel forms to be used by parents, students, and staff so that you can compare perceptions.

Before conducting the assessment, be sure others understand what the information is for, how it will be used, and that the results will be shared. Administer surveys when people are not feeling pressured and guarantee those completing a survey anonymity and confidentiality. The spring of the year is an ideal time since the information can be used for annual planning.

Step 3: Set climate improvement goals

What will we work on? This question demands a clear picture of the results of the surveys and much discussion by the task force, staff, and others involved in your climate improvement. It is desirable to identify no more than one or two major areas to work on, although a number of other less taxing areas might be addressed.

Step 4: Develop an action plan

When consensus has been reached and the goals have been put in writing, the task force and faculty develop the action plan — a plan that spells out *how* you will meet your goals, and *who* will do *what* and *when*. This also is put in writing and the goals and plan are shared with students, parents, and community.

Final steps

The final steps in the climate improvement process include implementation, monitoring, feedback, and evaluation. Implementation is, of course, a crucial phase. Timing is everything. There must be general agreement that the plan will work and sufficient commitment on the part of administration and staff to free up the necessary time and resources.

Once the plan has been implemented, it will take a great deal of hard work and attention to maintain the momentum. The task force should continue to meet at least once a month, and climate should be discussed in faculty meetings. To find out how well things are going, conduct an informal mid-year survey and share the results. Reinforce what's working and fix what needs fixing. Also, conduct annual climate surveys at about the same time each year — keeping surveying conditions as similar as possible — and compare results.

Celebrate gains and use the information to begin the process once again.

Every school in every community should provide a secure and stimulating environment in which to work and learn. Every school needs a climate that promotes healthy human relationships and enhances the quality of life for all.

Developing a winning climate in your school takes commitment and the constant attention of a critical mass of parents, students, and staff. Changing the climate —like changing the world — requires a special push from those who possess that unique quality called leadership.

Whether you're in the lead or a contributor, *you* can make a difference. Are you ready to do so now?

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Selected Climate Instruments

Learning Climate Inventory. Atlanta Institute of Education, 5244 South Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

Parent Opinion Survey. National Study of School Evaluation, 5201 Leesburg Pike, Falls Church, VA 22041.

School Assessment Survey. Research for Better Schools, 444 N. Third Street, Philadelphia, PA 19123.

School Climate Survey (Form A). National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1904 Association Drive, Reston, VA 22091.

School Improvement Inventory. Jim Sweeney, N229C Lagomarcino, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011.

Student Opinion Survey. Teacher National Study of School Evaluation, 5201 Leesburg Pike, Falls Church, VA 22041.

School Profile: Climate. Jim Sweeney, N229C Lagomarcino, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011.

Secondary School Attitude Inventory. J. Hoyle, Climate Research Associates, 1308 Todd Trail, College Station, TX 77840.

Standards for Quality Elementary Schools: School Climate. National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1920 Association Drive, Reston, VA 22091.

Teacher Opinion Survey. Student National Study of School Evaluation, 5201 Leesburg Pike, Falls Church, VA 22041.

The School Profile. CFK Limited, Englewood, CO 80110.

A number of instruments are not included. Some assess climate as part of a more comprehensive assessment.

Tips for Improving School Climate is a publication of the American Association of School Administrators, 1801 North Moore Street, Arlington, Virginia 22209-9988. The need for this publication was identified in a survey of AASA members and other school leaders who ranked school climate high in a list of issues having the greatest impact on schools.

Author Jim Sweeney is professor and section leader of educational administration at Iowa State University. He has worked with schools across the United States in school improvement and supervision. He has conducted climate studies in more than 800 schools and worked with more than 30,000 teachers.

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